Senator Runner's Week in Review

A Weekly Review That Will Keep You Informed and Up-to-Date

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Flood Control

Over the last twenty years, levee and flood channel maintenance has been hampered by a regulatory quagmire of federal and state agencies. As many as seven state and federal agencies can require permits for flood control projects. Extensive reviews, delays, mitigation requirements, and even lawsuits can delay projects five to ten years, creating enormous cost overruns. It is not difficult to understand why local maintenance districts have difficulty navigating the bureaucracy and managing the expense to perform their assigned duties.

News of the Week

Huge Cost Increases

Last year, the Department of Water Resources (DWR) reported the cost of levee repair has risen from an average of $300 per linear foot 20 years ago to $5,000 per linear foot today. This increase is a direct result of a regulatory atmosphere in which the flood control aspects of a project are treated as secondary to the project's importance in restoring wildlife habitat. The Department of Fish and Game (DFG), for instance, demands 2-1 and 3-1 mitigation ratios for habitat impacts of flood control projects, while the National Fish and Wildlife Service can impose a 5-1 ratio for vegetation removal. A review of five recent levee projects shows environmental mitigation now accounts for 20–50% of project costs.

The extensive mitigation required for flood projects must be completed before a project can begin. These mitigation requirements help create the delays that are such a significant expense, not to mention a major risk for local residents. Cost estimates of levee repairs have been known to increase ten-fold upon completion. One project on the Sacramento River in Colusa County, originally funded at $800,000 in 1996, was finally completed six years later at a cost of $8 million. Another funded after the 1995 floods just began construction this past spring due to regulatory delays.

Beware Levee Myopia

Levees are not a foolproof means of flood control, and a flood protection plan based solely on levees is unwise. Levees are earthen structures that erode easily, must be repaired frequently, and can give way under heavy pressure. Increasing our flood protection through levee raises is difficult

because it must be done systemwide to be effective. That is an expensive proposition. For example, DWR has estimated that rehabilitation of Central Valley levees and raising them to 100-year protection will cost $7-$12 billion.

Many flood officials are more concerned about the proper maintenance of flood channels. They believe silt and vegetation growth pose a grave threat because of the enormous pressure those things put on levees. Regulatory agencies are putting a damper on channel maintenance as well, and not just in the Reclamation Board's jurisdiction. Last January, the Mojave River overflowed at a known chokepoint, where costly regulations prevented local officials from performing regular maintenance. Damages from that flood are estimated at $80 million. Likewise, regulatory constraints on channel maintenance were a direct cause of a 1995 levee break on the Pajaro River in Monterey/Santa Cruz Counties that inflicted over $300 million in damage.

A Better Approach

A multi-pronged strategy involving not only levees but channel maintenance, rehabilitation of bypasses and weirs, and dams is needed. Increasing our flood storage capability will greatly reduce the strain on levees and provide far more flood protection. Dams are also a good insurance policy against our lack of scientific understanding of regional hydrology. At the time Folsom Dam was completed in 1954, engineers believed it would provide 500-year flood protection to the lower American River. But in just 50 years, it has saved Sacramento from at least two flood events that would have overwhelmed downstream levees, including the 1986 storms that poured more than twice the rainfall into the American River above Folsom Dam than downstream levees were designed to handle.

Reservoirs provide multiple, basin-wide benefits at a lower cost than systemwide levee upgrades. Three reservoir projects with costs estimated at $2.5 billion would create significant flood protection benefits. The controversial Auburn Dam proposal, with a cost estimated variably at $1 billion, would provide most of the American River's 100-year floodplain with an estimated 500-year protection and yield significant benefits for residents along the Sacramento and Feather Rivers.

A far less controversial opportunity for Central Valley flood control is the Upper San Joaquin River, east of Fresno. The Temperance Flat proposal, with an estimated cost of $1 billion, could provide up to 1.3 million acre-feet in additional water storage and significant flood protection downstream. The CalFed program recently identified the $500 million Shasta Dam raise as one of the most efficient, cost-effective proposals for bringing additional water supplies and fishery benefits to the Sacramento River. That project may be engineered to provide flood protection along the river. However, a 1989 state law granting Wild and Scenic Rivers (WSR) designation to the McCloud River, which feeds into Lake Shasta, prevents state participation in constructing that project.

Conclusion

Pumping tax dollars into existing levee programs will not produce effective flood control. In addition to streamlining those programs, lawmakers should consider dam projects and upgrades that will ease the pressure on levees, reduce the need for maintenance and repairs, and ultimately provide more flood control for the money.

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